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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN REACTIONS TO PAPAL COMMENTS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: A loud chorus of Egyptian political and religious leaders has publicly criticized Pope Benedict XVI's September 12 comments regarding Islam. The Pope's September 17 statement that he is "deeply sorry" about the reaction to his comments has been met with varying reactions in Egypt, with some al Azhar preachers rejecting the Pope's apology, but the Grand Shaykh of al Azhar stating that he will not comment on the Pope's apology until he has read the entire statement. Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mahdi Akef reportedly has said that the Pope's apologetic statement was "sufficient," but some MB MP's are agitating for parliamentary committee meetings to further discuss the issue. END SUMMARY.

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MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN LEADERS ARE CRITICAL  
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12. (SBU) According to press reports, Grand Shaykh of al Azhar Mohamed Sayyed Tantawi issued a September 15 statement "denouncing" the comments "attributed to Pope Benedict XVI, noting that they reflect "egregious ignorance of Islam ... the statements, which enraged 1.8 billion (sic) Muslims around the world, do not serve efforts to sustain dialogue among religions, civilizations and cultures." Following the Pope's reported September 17 statement noting that he is "deeply sorry" about the reaction in some countries to his comments, and that his quotation of 14th century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus does not reflect his personal views, Grand Shaykh Tantawi issued a press statement that he would not comment on the Pope's apology until after carefully reading his comments in full. However, according to September 18 press reports, several al Azhar preachers have declared a rejection of the Pope's apology.

13. (SBU) At a September 17 press conference, Coptic Pope Shenouda III said that "the teachings of Jesus Christ are against insulting others," and stressed that Pope Benedict's "error" "would not undermine the distinguished ties between Islam and Christianity that date back more than 14 centuries." Shenouda called on Egyptians to stand united against "foreign schemes to sow the seeds of discord between Muslims and Christians." Coptic Church spokesman Bishop Murcos told Al-Wafd daily newspaper on September 16 that, "the Church categorically rejects the comments of the Vatican pope. We must respect the Muslim faithful and their prophet as we respect the followers of Jesus Christ and it is

unacceptable to offend their religious beliefs." The deputy patriarch of Egypt's Catholics, Father Yohana Qalta, in comments to the IslamOnline website on September 16 attributed Pope Benedict's comments to his poor knowledge of Islam and Muslims, warning that the "surprising remarks" could play into the hands of extremists. Qalta said, "The pontiff's words have surprised the Catholics in Egypt and the whole East."

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GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS DENOUNCE POPE'S STATEMENTS  
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14. (SBU) MFA spokesman Ala al-Hadidi on September 15 quoted Egyptian FM Ahmed Aboul Gheit as expressing fear that the Pope's statements might instigate calls for a clash between cultures and weaken efforts to bring "the West and East closer." Aboul Gheit called for "urgent clarifications" of the comments. In a September 15 statement, Safwat al Sherif, speaker of the Egyptian Shura Council (upper parliamentary house) expressed, "complete resentment at (the Pope's) statements, which ... offended Islam and the honorable Prophet, and contradicted the respect of the values of tolerance promoted by the various heavenly religions and the values of dialogue between civilizations." The Shura Council called on the Pope to "clarify the truth about what was attributed to him and set matters right by declaring the truth about these statements in order to put an end to the wide resentment which dominated the Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic street over these statements." According to press reports, Speaker of the People's Assembly Fathi Surour issued a statement on September 15 asserting that "the latest attack on Islam is a continuation of anti-Islamic campaigns ... this recalls the Catholic Church's antagonistic attitude towards the Islamic faith since the 8th century ...." Dr. Ahmed Omar Hashem, chair of Parliament's Religious Affairs Committee, also issued a statement calling on the Pope to apologize and to vow not to repeat "such an act." Following

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the Pope's September 17 apology, Hashem told reporters that his committee would convene on September 18 to discuss a "reply."

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MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD REACTION  
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15. (SBU) Muslim Brotherhood (MB) Supreme Guide Mohamed Mahdi Akef "expressed his anger" in a September 15 statement published on the MB's website and widely reported in the Egyptian press. Akef called on the Pope to apologize for his statements and to begin an "in-depth and fair" study of Islam. In subsequent September 18 press reports, Akef is quoted as stating that the Pope's September 17 apologetic statement is "sufficient." However, deputy chairman of the MB parliamentary bloc, Husayn Muhamed Ibrahim, on September 17 called for a joint emergency meeting of the parliamentary Religious Affairs and Foreign Relations Committees, to discuss "the ramifications of the grave offense of the Pope of Rome against Islam ... it has become well known that, although he regretted his statements, the pronouncements made by the Pope reveal an acute fanaticism and extreme ignorance not only of Islam, the Prophet, and history of Islam, but also of the history of mankind, which has recognized the role of Islamic civilization in helping Europe exit from the Dark Ages ...." Other MB parliamentarians have reportedly called for a "massive" September 22 conference at al Azhar to discuss ways of confronting "the worldwide anti-Islamic campaign," and called for cutting off ties with the Vatican until the Pope has retracted his statement. Others have allegedly criticized the Grand Shaykh of al Azhar for his "feeble position" on the issue.

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COMMENT

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¶6. (SBU) While mass protests have not materialized as some had predicted, emotions surrounding the Pope's comments are nonetheless running high, among both religious and secular leaders. With memories of the Danish cartoon controversy and Lebanon crisis clearly in mind, Egyptian politicians and religious leaders are anxious to act as vigilant defenders of Islam, and to remain ahead of the curve of Egyptian public opinion during this latest controversy; so far, they have been successful.

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